



# Lymphedema

The lymphatic system is an important part of the immune system. Its primary function is to transport lymph, a colorless fluid containing infection-fighting white blood cells, throughout the body to help remove toxins, waste and other unwanted material.

When the lymphatic system is damaged or blocked, lymph fluid can build in your body's soft tissues and cause swelling. This is called lymphedema. Lymphedema usually happens in the arms or legs. The blocked fluid is susceptible to bacteria growth and infection, so it is very important to work with your provider to find ways to manage the swelling.

## Lymphedema Causes

- Infection
- Cancer
- Scar tissue from radiation therapy or surgical removal of lymph nodes
- Inherited conditions in which lymph nodes or vessels are absent or abnormal

## Lymphedema Types

- Primary lymphedema can be present at birth or can develop later in life. It is unknown what causes primary lymphedema.
- Secondary lymphedema can develop as a result of surgery, radiation treatment infection or trauma. Any surgery that requires removal of lymph nodes puts a patient at risk.

Speak with your provider to understand reasons why you have lymphedema and if there are any lifestyle changes you may consider making to improve your condition, such as losing weight, exercise, elevating your legs or arms and compression therapy.

## Treatment and Care

Treatment may help control your symptoms and improve your quality of life. Your provider may refer you to a physical therapist or other specialist who may be able to provide additional treatments such as manual lymphatic drainage (massage), special bandages and devices that you can use at home to decrease the swelling.

### **If you notice any of the following symptoms, notify your provider immediately:**

- You have a sudden marked increase in swelling (especially if lymphedema occurred post-cancer surgery).
- Red, blotchy skin over the affected area.
- You have a fever of 101 F degrees or higher.
- You have an increase in leg pain.
- Discolored drainage or a bad odor from an ulcer, if you have one.

## Preventive Measures

### Skin Care

- Avoid trauma/injury and reduce infection risk.
- Keep extremity clean and dry.
- Apply moisturizer daily.
- Protect exposed skin with sunscreen and insect repellent.
- Use razors carefully to prevent irritation or trauma.
- Practice cautious nail care, do not cut cuticles.
- Wear gloves while doing activities that may cause injury.
- If minor cuts or scratches occur, cleanse with soap and water and apply antibiotic ointment. Watch for signs of early infection and report any open sores to your doctor. Your skin is the body's largest organ and an opening can allow germs and bacteria to penetrate and cause infection.

### Activity / Lifestyle

- Regular exercise, such as walking will help improve the circulation. Your provider will recommend an appropriate exercise program. Gradually build up the duration and intensity of any exercises.
- Take frequent rest periods to allow for limb recovery.
- Monitor the affected limb during and after activity for any change in size, shape, soreness, heaviness, or firmness.
- Maintain optimal weight.
- Avoid limb constriction.
- Avoid having blood pressure taken in the at-risk arm.

### Compression Garments

- Should be properly fitted for adequate support.
- Always support the at-risk limb with compression garment for any strenuous activity.

### Treatment Extremes

- Avoid exposure to extreme cold as this can cause rebound swelling and chapped skin.
- Avoid prolonged (greater than 15 minutes) exposure to heat (i.e., hot tubs). Avoid public hot tubs if you have any open sores or lesions.
- Do not immerse limb in water temperature above 102 F.

### Added Measures for Lower Extremity Lymphedema

- Avoid prolonged sitting or standing.
- Do not cross your legs.
- Wear proper, well-fitting footwear.

For more information, call:

**815.300.5997**

1851 Silver Cross Blvd., Ste 130, Pavilion D  
New Lenox, IL 60451

silvercross.org